

Taking great pains: critical theory, affective pedagogies and radical democracy

Sarah Amsler

samsler@lincoln.ac.uk

Centre for Educational Research and Development
University of Lincoln (UK)

Abstract The consolidation of neoliberal capitalism over the past decade has been intense, as has the articulation of critical and creative responses to it. One of the most remarkable is the turn towards forms of political resistance that seek liberation from the logics of state and capital while – or through – simultaneously creating alternative, radically democratic modes of existence. Many of these draw on anarchistic and autonomist traditions of critical theory which assert the possibility of prefiguring alternative political projects as well as critiquing existing ones, thus appearing to transcend what Herbert Marcuse described as a ‘vicious circle’ of liberation (1964, 1967). We have thus seen a proliferation of work on problems of prefigurative politics, autonomy, co-operation and self-valorisation; significantly, there is renewed attention to pedagogy in critical theory and as a political practice. However, there is still little attention to the affective and social labour that this type of prefigurative theory and practice requires, or to the systemic critique of the conditions of possibility for it to constitute a challenge to neoliberalism. My concern is that these lacunae can lead to misinterpretations of the meaning of radical democracy and of its possibilities and limitations as a challenge to the logics of neoliberal capitalism and other forms of dehumanising power. In this paper, I draw on work with British-based cultural workers who are active in radical-democratic projects to illustrate how bringing practical work into conversation with critical theories of political subjectivity, on the one hand, and theories of affective pedagogy and politics, on the other, can contribute to strengthening both theories and practices of radical democracy.

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Are we all radical democrats now?

In the autumn of 2011, Judith Butler wrote a short essay about whether the most recent global financial crisis had caused the new waves of social unrest which had resurged in Greece and across the world. In it, she argued that 'the call on the streets is precisely not to "fix" this fiscal crisis, but to insist that the dismantling of neo-liberalism is imperative for the renewal of radical democracy' (Butler 2011a). I would like to use this statement to reflect on what radical democracy is, and what it might mean to renew or cultivate it in our everyday lives. However, I would also like to ask whether the statement should be turned on its head. Rather than supposing that radically democratic ways of thinking, feeling, doing and being are consequences of the dismantling of neoliberalism, I propose that we regard them as prefigurative epistemologies and practices which contribute to the dismantling of neoliberalism and other antidemocratic forms and logics of social life.

However, as both the dismantling of capitalist relations and the creation of radically democratic societies are utopian projects that require high levels of social participation, I would also like to reflect on the ease with which notions of radicality now circulate in critical theoretical work.¹ To be sure, many of the things associated with the term 'radical democracy' – states of genuine political and intellectual autonomy, intensive forms of social collectivity or affinity, egalitarian and horizontal forms of economic organisation, encouragement of creative experimentation, deep levels of receptivity to otherness and to that which is new, and acceptance of the 'infinitely demanding' ethical character of both critique and democracy itself – offer critical tools for challenging the deadening determinations of neoliberal rationality. As Nikolas Kompridis has argued,

'[t]hese taxing and exhausting times require cultural practices that can reopen the future and unclothe the past, cultural practices that can regenerate hope and confidence in the face of conditions that threaten to make even their regeneration meaningless. Philosophy, critical theory, critique, whatever name one wants to use, have been and can still be possibility-disclosing practices [...] practices that can facilitate the renewal of utopian energies, the regeneration of confidence and hope' (2006: 277).

This argument is not new, but belongs to a tradition of thinking that radical democracy has a prominent place in the critical philosophy of transformative experience, as well as in traditions of socially engaged art, critical education and political activism. We have many eloquent philosophical statements on what radical democracy is and could be, as well as on the nature of transformative experience, the affective and moral foundations of critique, and the ontology and epistemology of otherness (Kompridis 2006: 2011). However, many of these philosophical treatments were not produced in response to concrete problems of radical-democratic practice, and some do not speak to practice at all. Similarly, in traditions of critical pedagogy and social movement education there are rich bodies of knowledge about attempts to democratise knowledge and learning, and insight into the complexity of

¹ Here, I use the term 'project' in the way of Herbert Marcuse, to mean the undetermined realisation of a particular social formation. As he argues, 'the way in which a society organizes the life of its members involves an initial *choice* between historical alternatives which are determined by the inherited level of the material and intellectual culture. The choice itself results from the play of the dominant interests. It *anticipates* specific modes of transforming and utilizing man and nature and rejects other modes. It is one "project" of realization among others' (Marcuse 1964).

situations where people embrace transformative encounters with themselves, others, power, limits and borders, and new ways of being (Boler 1999, Dewey 1938, Freire 2000, hooks 1994, Rancière 2010, Sandlin *et al.* 2011). But again, while the relationship between knowledge, power and liberation is well theorised in such work, there is little philosophical explanation of how and why such projects work in practice.

These lines of thinking can be brought into more productive conversation with one another. For example, a recent essay by Nikolas Kompridis (2011) on the relationship between critique and democracy may be read as a challenge to socially engaged artists and educators. Kompridis argues that in order to engage in practices of critique, people must first be receptive to change – and that this receptivity can neither be taken for granted as pre-existing nor ‘taught’ in a didactic way.² But if democratic life demands that we ‘work on ourselves’ by ‘becoming receptive and answering the normative demand to think and act differently from how we have been thinking and acting’, where is this work meant to take place, and of what does it consist concretely? If conditions for receptivity, democratic deliberation and critique do not already obtain, what ‘possibility-enabling practices’ might be conducive to their emergence?

Such questions resonate with the problems encountered by artists and educators working in ‘frontline communities’, as community and cultural activist work is sometimes described. Many speak of the exhausting efforts that are required to engage in long-term struggles to facilitate such ambiguous ‘possibility-enabling practices’ in conditions of struggle that sometimes appear almost hopelessly foreclosed. Bringing critical-theoretical, critical-pedagogical and critical-practical perspectives together can offer deeper insight into why we are rarely but can always potentially be open to critical thinking and practice. It offers insight into the conditions for deep forms of democratic life, into the material and subjective conditions of possibility for these conditions to obtain, and into how people are working to cultivate them through education, the arts and through political action in everyday life.

This work also has the potential to resolve a paradox of power that Herbert Marcuse referred to as a ‘vicious circle’ of liberation. Marcuse argued that in order for any radical transformation of society to occur, the ‘rupture with the self-propelling conservative continuum of needs must *precede* the revolution which is to usher in a free society, but such rupture itself can be envisaged only in a revolution’ (Marcuse 1969; see also 1964: 250). In other words, Marcuse was concerned that

‘...transcendence beyond the established conditions (of thought and action) presupposes transcendence *within* these conditions. This negative freedom – i.e., freedom from the oppressive and ideological power of given facts – is the *a priori* of the historical dialectic; it is the element of choice and decision in and against historical determination. None of the given alternatives is *by itself* determinate negation unless and until it is consciously seized in order to break the power of

² According to Kompridis, receptivity is non-instrumental because it is not about satisfying felt needs; rather, ‘we do not yet know where we will arrive, for we do not yet “know” the nature of the need that impels us or where it will lead us’ (2006: 204). Receptivity thus demands *persistence*, just as effective critique demands ‘suffering’ the world, without special privilege for being ‘its’ critic, and with no verification for truth or self other than that which is not yet in existence (Kompridis 2006: 258, 272).

intolerable conditions and attain the more rational, more logical conditions rendered possible by the prevailing ones. In any case, the rationality and logic invoked in the movement of thought and action is that of the given conditions to be transcended' (1964).³

Marcuse found it difficult to envisage how processes of becoming-other could be revolutionary prior to revolution, or in how there could be cracks in the dominant rationalities which shape our imagination of both present and future. Radical democracy, particularly in its prefigurative forms, ostensibly allows us to imagine such possibilities.

Yet what is often missing from this argument is an acknowledgement that radical democracy is also an exhausting form of politics in its own right. It is an intense, oppositional logic of practice which has ambivalent qualities of being simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting, comforting and terrifying, liberating and paralysing, and joyous and painful (Trowell 2012). As one young educational activist said, 'I don't think transformation is only liberatory or exhilarating. It can be quite painful and a fraught process.' Many argue that you have to be a special sort of person to engage in such activity.⁴ This experience is intensified when the values, vocabularies and practices of such projects are rendered unintelligible within existing political frameworks. They are not only unfamiliar, but often deliberately uncomfortable and thus easily perceived as threats to the existing order of things.⁵ The project of radical democracy therefore has as much potential to close down possibilities for transformation as it does to open them up.⁶ The assumption that it is inherently transformative, or that it emerges spontaneously by force of circumstance, distracts us from asking questions about what actually makes it not only possible, but a desirable way of living together.

In this paper, I therefore do not ask either how we can dismantle neoliberalism or all become radical democrats. My questions are more modest, and emerge from the basic demand on critical theorists to understand the character, limits and potentialities of 'possibility-enabling practices'. I ask what work socially engaged educators, artists and activists undertake – or

³ Elsewhere, Marcuse (1967) described this circle as 'brutal' in its impossibility, as 'the transition from voluntary servitude (as it exists to a great extent in the affluent society) to freedom presupposes the abolition of the institutions and mechanism of repression. And the abolition of the institutions and mechanisms of repression already presupposes liberation from servitude, prevalence of the need for liberation'.

⁴ This is a familiar formulation, which can be seen in the Frankfurt School studies on 'the authoritarian personality' (1950), Theodor Adorno's essays on education after the Holocaust (Adorno 1967; Adorno and Becker 1999; Amsler 2011), and Herbert Marcuse's notion of 'the new human being'. Of particular interest is Douglas Kellner's essay on Marcuse's quest to define a 'radical subject' with a 'sensibility that would revolt against the existing society and attempt to create a new one' (2002). Kellner argues that, even prior to the poststructuralist turn and separately from discourses on radical democracy, 'Marcuse posits a subjectivity that is libidinal and embodied, evolving and developing, while striving for happiness, gratification, and harmony. Such subjectivity is always in process, is never fixed or static, and is thus a creation and goal to be achieved, and is not posited as an absolute metaphysical entity. Marcusean subjectivity is thus corporeal, gendered, oppositional, and struggles against domination, repression, and oppression, and for freedom and happiness.'

⁵ As Kompridis argues, the unfamiliar and uncontrollable qualities of 'the new' make it an ambiguous phenomenon. On one hand, they 'become reasons for why we should mistrust the new, or they can become the intellectual and affective conditions necessary for its emergence' (2011: 257).

⁶ Here, I am drawing heavily on the philosophical work of Nikolas Kompridis (2006, 2011).

indeed, undergo – so that radically democratic principles and practices become viable possibilities in everyday life? What material, social, cognitive, semantic, and affective conditions are conducive to the materialisation of such possibilities once imagined? Finally, what role, if any, can pedagogy and thought play in these processes?

Before examining these questions, I should define ‘radical democracy’. For whom is it meaningful and important? Where are languages of radical democracy spoken, and where are they unfamiliar, rejected or unintelligible? What distinguishes it from other, less ‘radical’ notions of politics circulating in Anglo-European societies, and with which does it resonate? What, if anything, lends the notion of radical democracy plausibility as a robust counterweight to neoliberal forms of power in this historical moment? And does resisting the capitalist reordering of social life mean that we are all radical democrats now?

What is radical democracy?

The contemporary notion of radical democracy – which is better understood as an assemblage of liberatory theories and practices rather than a unitary system – refers in the broadest sense to practices of autonomous, collective and egalitarian self-rule that aim to continually intensify collective human flourishing, partly by creating spaces for its expansion and partly by refusing to accept all institutional, material, cognitive, symbolic or affective limitations which are inevitably encountered in this pursuit. Although somewhat formulaic, Jason Vick’s inventory of principles that characterise deep forms of democracy offers a useful framework, which includes ‘a strongly egalitarian sensibility, an emphasis on citizen participation, a concern for individual development, an expansive notion of the political, a critique of existing democratic institutions and practices, and a critique of capitalism as it currently operates’ (2012: 1).⁷ What distinguishes radical democracy from shallower participatory forms, however, is a cultivated receptivity to ‘agonism and concern for difference’, a belief that real politics is an ‘often sporadic and rare’ activity, and an attention to ‘the surplus time, resources and localism that is necessary to partake in politics’ (Vick 2012: 1).

Jacques Rancière’s work clarifies why Vick argues that democratic politics is a rare phenomenon. Rancière suggests that democracy is what happens at the *limits* of institutionalised and habituated forms of social life. He finds it in the ‘often short-lived moment when those who are excluded from the political order or included in it in a subordinate way, stand up and speak for themselves’, and who in doing so disclose even the most sacred institutions as enclosures of social possibility (2010: 9). Rancière therefore locates the most authentic moments of democracy in relations of *dissensus* – not in the deceptively stable, seamless stream of social life moving along, but in the disorienting, uncomfortable and decentring moments in which new bodies, languages, experiences and needs demand to be included in political systems, institutions, forms of knowledge and modes of existence that cannot survive their accommodation without being changed. These encounters therefore have the potential to ‘effectuat[e] a change in the distribution of the sensible’ of the system on the whole (2010: 147).⁸ The intensities of the openings-up and

⁷ See Vick’s footnote on discussion of difference between deliberative, agonistic and liberal democracy.

⁸ The extension of radical democracy to knowledge is perhaps best expressed in the post-structuralist attention to the ‘world-making powers’ of sounds, grammars, syntax and semantics; the insistence

closings-down that ensue in such situations are, according to Rancière, the only meaningful measures of democracy itself.⁹

The desire for such politics is not new. It can be seen in Emma Goldman's injunction that the ends of any revolution must be visible in its means (Goldman 1924 in Bertalan 2011: 221); in John Dewey's dream of educating for a 'creative democracy' that might constitute 'a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute' (Dewey 1939); and in Albert Camus' argument that the only way to ensure international peace was to abandon hope in extant political institutions and 'reconsider everything from the ground up, so as to shape a living society inside a dying society' (Camus 1946). Goldman, Dewey and Camus did not identify themselves as 'radical democrats'. But their refusals to conflate the institutionalised and procedural regimes of democratic politics with lived experiences of democratic freedom mark them as exemplars of this sensibility, as does their insistence that the radical critique – and where necessary the dismantling – of such institutions is a necessary condition of democracy itself.

Vick locates contemporary interest in such conceptions of democracy in the revolutionary-utopian energies of the 1960s and 1970s, but traces its origins to the crisis of the state-centred and procedural models of liberal democracy that dominated social theory and organised politics for much of the twentieth century (2012: 4). Interest in radical-democratic theory and practice was dampened during the 1980s by the consolidation of neoliberal capitalism, the 'structural adjustments' imposed on the global south by the IMF, the managerial revolution in liberal-democratic public institutions, and the disarticulation of organised Left politics in the face of new conservative blocs. Some argue that democratic energies were further asphyxiated by the victories of the new social movements themselves, which were thought to have opened space for a rapprochement between capitalism, autonomy and creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; Fraser 2009). The publication of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a Radical Democratic Politics* in 1985 revived academic debates about radical democracy with its critique of both orthodox Marxism and liberal democracy and its articulation of an alternative theory of agonistic democracy. At the same time, counter-hegemonic struggles were articulating through the work of anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, democracy activists in the Soviet bloc, autonomous workers' cooperatives in Western Europe, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico, alternative economies in Western Europe, feminist political collectives of care across Latin America, and anti-authoritarian educators in schools, universities and informal educational projects around the world. During the 1990s, anti-capitalist, alter-globalisation and direct action movements such as Reclaim the Streets, ACTup and the World Social Forum shifted the terrain even further as these struggles began to articulate into a 'movement of movements' (Graeber 2002). Ana Dinerstein and Séverine

that the fixing of meaning through these forms is an exercise of power; and therefore that the problematisation of representation must be a permanent, vigilant and inexhaustible element of any projects for progressive politics. For Michel Foucault, this meant 'to bring it about that [people] "no longer know what to do", so that the acts, gestures, discourses which had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous'. Judith Butler likewise has argued that 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalising...repressive structures or the rallying points for a liberatory consciousness', and that she 'would like to have it permanently unclear what the sign signifies'.

⁹ For a critique of Rancière's theory of the distribution of sensibility, see Kompridis (2011).

Deneulin have aptly given the name 'Hope Movements' to a range of social movements which 'do not attempt to articulate or engage in alternative development initiatives, as these ultimately reproduce the logic of the state, but rather 'are engaged in an autonomous *search* for a new way of life which is more conducive to creating an environment where human beings can live in dignity' (2012: 589). Over the course of a decade, these movements united and fragmented in a dynamic meta-movement which attracted pockets of public curiosity and, while they never constituted a counter-hegemonic bloc, they unsettled a longstanding faith in the sustainability of liberal democratic institutions, ethics and subjectivities (Day 2011).

However, while alternatives to both capitalism and liberal democracy are clearly demonstrated within these diverse struggles, the radical democratic imaginary fell even farther off the radar of everyday life as public discourses on politics, education and culture consolidated around concepts of representative democracy, multicultural 'tolerance', national security and neo-liberal individualism. It was not until financial capitalism began to spiral into a new cycle of violent crises during the early 2000s that the idea of radical democracy became salient in popular politics and media, particularly as increasingly defiant protests against government 'austerity' intensified and more violent forms of state control were legitimised in response. As Isham Christie has argued, 'as socio-economic conditions continue to deteriorate and dissatisfaction in representatives grows, the response we are seeing is not cynicism or apathy. It is the beginning of an awakening toward radical social change', which recognises that 'a liberal response to appease unrestrained capitalism *and* people's interest is impossible' (2012). With the major occupations of the Wisconsin State House and New York's Zuccotti Park, the public squares of Athens and Madrid and St. Paul's Cathedral in London behind us, conversations about direct action, do-it-yourself organising, temporary autonomous zones and prefigurative politics are, if certainly not common sense, at least not taboo.¹⁰ It is no longer regarded as completely ludicrous to speak of revolution or to argue that deep democracy is a viable and desirable organising principle of for social life.¹¹

Time for a politics of possibility

These critical-experimental modalities of resistance are challenging and exciting not simply because they are uncommon, but because they have interrupted a widespread 'crisis of hope' and been enacted in environments where oppositional politics were presumed to be

¹⁰ I am deliberately excluding reference to the 'Arab Spring' revolts and revolutions in this context, for while there have been clear resonances between these movements for social change I believe their particularities warrant the refusal to conflate them.

¹¹ It may or may not be helpful to refer to Occupy as a 'movement'. Jason Adams (2011) defines it as a 'divergent assemblage of individual and collective singularities' that will 'either increasingly resonate and compose a more formidable counter-temporality, or progressively decompose, as occurred with the Sixties generation following Reagan and the Seattle generation following Bush'. Similarly, Saul Newman has defined radical democracy as a 'series of mobilizations and practices of emancipation, rather than as a specific set of institutional arrangements' (Newman 2011: 65). And, according to Vick, Wolin understands radical democracy as an "ephemeral phenomenon rather than a settled system", a multiplicity of "small politics, small projects, small business" in which those who have "no means of redress" act and speak their grievances' (Wolin in Vick 2012: 25).

more or less dead.¹² As Simon Critchley (2012b) recently argued, 'Occupy is the becoming-conscious of a deep disaffection with normal politics, particularly among the young'. It captures the imagination because it affects, evoking a 'sense of aliveness' and affirming our 'changeability' (Massumi 2002: 15).¹³ The idea of radical democracy is popular not because it is a pragmatic politics but because it produces affective resources of hope which offer foundations for a new politics of possibility.

The 'politics of possibility' J. K. Gibson-Graham's name for a prefigurative type of politics which offers a 'vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty' (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxvii). It is also the name for a political imaginary, which Gibson-Graham argue has been 'radically altering the established spatiotemporal frame of progressive politics, reconfiguring the position and role of the subject, [and] shifting the grounds for assessing the efficacy of political movements and initiatives' in recent years (Gibson-Graham 2006: xix).¹⁴ It is different from democratic politics-as-usual in that, like many of the 'newest social movements' which are anarchistic in nature, it does not presume that direct struggle against dominant groups, institutions or ideologies is an effective strategy of resistance against hegemonic forms of power, or that it is a path towards autonomous and creative alternatives.

A politics of possibility therefore works through processes of 'disengagement and reconstruction rather than by reform or revolution; with the end of creating not a new knowable totality (counter-hegemony), but of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity' (Day 2011: 108, 113). This model of democracy valorises dissensus, infinite openness to difference, deep criticality, the decentring and 'tearing away' of certainties, continual transformation and permanent revolution. It is prefigurative because it seeks to create new worlds that embody these principles by working within and using the resources of the existing one, with particular attention to the micro-politics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions which frame all of the above (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxvii).

While there is not scope to explore the full meaning of prefigurative politics here, it is worth noting that common definitions include four dimensions:

¹² The notions of 'critical' and 'experimental' attitude are both from Foucault. For Foucault's explanation of the first, see 'What is critique?' (Foucault 2007). For a discussion of the second, see Tully (1999).

¹³ Although David Graeber suggests that the Occupy movement 'caught on' because 'most Americans are far more willing to embrace radical ideas than anyone in the established media is willing to admit. The basic message - that the American political order is absolutely and irredeemably corrupt, that both parties have been bought and sold by the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population, and that if we are to live in any sort of genuinely democratic society, we're going to have to start from scratch - clearly struck a profound chord in the American psyche' (2011b).

¹⁴ For an alternative reading of prefigurative politics based on the theorisations and practices within non-violent anarchist movements, see Epstein (2002).

- *A grounded critique of capitalism and a conception of its alternatives*

Politics here means commitment to social, political and economic justice in both the concrete struggles of everyday life and issues of global scale; always-already here and now, rather than elsewhere in the future following education or revolution (Fielding and Moss 2011). Democracy understood in this way values 'prefigurative practice' (Fielding and Moss 2011: Gibson–Graham 2006). As such, it is understood as an historical project, the ongoing construction of and struggle to have the right to construct an ethical way of life and/or a state of being, rather than a system of institutions or an institutionalised response to them (Fielding and Moss 2011: 42; Lummis 1996: 22, 112). The politics of possibility is thus a practical expression of an ethos of critical experimentation, which shifts 'critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression' (Foucault 1984: 45).¹⁵ For all of these reasons, the project of radical democracy is inherently, necessarily and militantly anti-capitalist.

- *An anti-deterministic philosophy of human nature and the knowing, acting and feeling subject*

This view of progressive politics is premised upon a radical and generous faith in human potentiality and the 'insistent affirmation of possibility' (Dewey 1939, 1916; Fielding and Moss 2011: 82). It is based upon an assumption that the self, our relationships, knowledges and histories are necessarily emergent and undetermined (Dewey 1937, 1938, 1939; Fielding and Moss 2011: 161; Freire 2000; Lummis 1996: 42). As group dynamics are just as contingent as individual subjectivity, we must also leave open possibilities for 'positional restlessness' and for people to 'defy' familiar and scripted roles in exchange for trying out something new (Fielding and Moss 2011: 154).

From here, outcomes of political struggles are never seen as simple matters of failure or success, but rather moments in ongoing processes. As human experience 'can have no end until experience itself comes to an end, then the task of democracy is to forever strive for a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute' (Dewey 1939). Radical democracy is therefore not simply an *unfinished* project, but an *unfinishable* project. Recognising the ubiquity of power in human relationships, 'we can never allow ourselves to think that we are "done", that we have identified all the sites, structures and processes of oppression "out there" and, most crucially, "in here", inside our own individual and group identities' (Day 2005). Visions of 'transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty' (Gibson–Graham 2006: xxvii), of 'the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2010: 37), of the will to 'continual transformation' (Nietzsche), the 'state of permanent creation'

¹⁵ In Richard Day's terms, it signals a shifting from the 'politics of demand' to something more like a 'politics of the act'. This means a turn away from modalities of resistance that wait for power to either come to see the reason of its opponents or to dissolve itself, towards practices that favour 'inventing a response which precludes the necessity of the demand and thereby breaks out of the loop of the endless perpetuation of desire for emancipation' within the existing system (Day 2011: 108).

(Deleuze), the 'state of perpetual transition' (Anzaldua) and the 'state of eternal change' (Goldman in Bartalan 2011) are all expressions of this spirit (Bartalan 2011).

- *Critical theories of knowledge production, learning and encounter*

If we presume that 'unfinished' subjects are engaged in projects to expand their collective possibilities and diminish, resist or transcend their limitations, it is important to have a theory of knowledge which is itself undetermined, unpredictable, unquantifiable and wild, and which embraces intellectual and social experimentation. The critical-experimental attitude is therefore central to all theories of radical democracy (Dewey 1938, 1939). However, in order to maintain an ethos of experimentalism that is loving rather than violent, it is also necessary that this epistemology be receptive to critique, on the one hand, and facilitative of encountering difference, otherness and 'the new' in open-hearted, open-minded and open-ended ways, on the other. Radical democracy is grounded in an epistemology that is militantly humble and humbly experimental.

- *Methodologies for living everyday life, resisting power and transforming social reality*

None of the above practices can be entered into as an individualistic matter. A fundamental condition of a politics of possibility is therefore the building of deep and durable social relationships which are based on mutual trust, aid and solidarity. This is difficult to do through institutional procedures, and on the contrary requires a dedicated ethics of care and attentiveness to others (Gibson–Graham 2006; Lummis 1996: 88); as well as an ethics of care for the self (e.g. 'revolutionary self-cultivation'; see Gibson–Graham 2006: xxxv).

The promise of prefigurative politics is that it opens possibilities for 'being the change you want to see in the world' – or, more precisely, to practice attempting to be the change you want to see (Lehr 2012). It is precisely this possibility that people describe as inspiring: the thrill of the new; the expansion of transformative, revolutionary human creativity into the space of the political itself. The time and space of utopia are simultaneously contracted and expanded here: contracted, in that alternative futures become either present-in-practice or within imaginable reach; expanded, in that the horizons of possibility are therefore opened into infinity. If nothing else can be said for certain about such experiences, they are often exhilaratingly joyous – or even experienced, as Gavin Grindon argued (with reference to a flying anarchist), 'mythic moments of potent affect' (2007: 94). Many people who participate in radical democratic experiments for any length of time speak affectionately about their experiences of individual autonomy; new forms of non-competitive, non-instrumentalist and cooperative relationships with others; of belonging and being accepted; of the novel redistribution of time and space; of the thrill of self-governance; of feeling free from the constraints of dominating concepts, habits, relationships, vocabularies, institutions and path dependencies; and of coming to voice through collective caring and mutual aid.

Mission impossible?

But this hope is fragile. As Critchley points out, such prefigurative practice 'requires subjective invention, imagination and endurance, not to mention tenacity and cunning' and

demands a recognition that the education of new subjectivities is often pursued through prosaic and 'largely unthrilling work'. As one activist recently wrote,

'The trap of the old world is hard to wriggle out of... and the escape is a learning process. Humans learn by doing. When we were little children, we emulated the adult world in our pretend play, joyfully doing the serious work of creativity and cognitive development. Let's reverse that process. Let's "play real", emulating the world we want, until it grows and grows and becomes more real than the dead old world. This kind of 'play', as those who are already so deeply committed to Occupy and social change and activism already know, is damned hard work. *We have to resist*, first, the cultural values so ingrained on our psyches—things like competition, and distrust of strangers. *We have to confront* our own privilege, and the ways in which we are oppressed, so that we can be ready to be open to the ways that those privileges and oppressions intersect with the people we will be working with. *We have to really listen* to one another, *be ready for the long hard work of real dialogue*, *ready to value disagreements as opportunities* for new solutions. We must be ready to accept that some of us are angry, or sad, or tired; and are going to be that way for a long time. We must be there to listen, to offer care and to offer alternatives for support outside the dominant system. *We have to fight the anger and sadness and weariness by making joy, with play; with art; with creativity; with action.* With values that have nothing to do with buying and selling and labor-for- pay' (Lehr 2012).

Who other than the most committed – and the most privileged and powerful – activists could embrace and sustain such a politics? Even for those who are deeply committed to practicing such politics in everyday life, it is not an easy mode of existence, as 'there are substantial emotional costs in the very act of taking a resistive stance on an issue, particularly when one is opposing the dominant beliefs of society' (Brown and Pickerill 2009: 152). Jim, an artist–educator who has been active in a democratic collective for more than two decades, suggests that such projects exercise a 'weak muscle' in a society that spends so much energy teaching people how to be individualistic rather than collaborative. He says:

'I think that people can get tired of the experience of constant self-management; you know, of trying to be flat, trying to negotiate everything with each other all the time. That ain't easy, and I think somebody will feel – actually, I don't need to do that, I want to just be in a hierarchy; give me a job and then I can get on with other things I want to do. [...] I can see why they would feel that.'

Such feelings can be intensified for people in particularly precarious positions who have demanding responsibilities caring for others, suffer from psychological and emotional pain, live in 'front-line communities' or must simply struggle for economic or physical survival. As one activist observed, it is ironic that the most popular projects in radical democracy are often 'slow-moving beasts' because 'people don't have the money, people are dealing with injustice on a daily level' (Dan 2012). While living in a world of contracting possibilities is painful, working to expand the horizons of freedom can be difficult as well. For many people, therefore, the 'politics of possibility' simply does not appear possible at all – and it is often least possible for those who are imagined as its primary subjects. And while it is important to engage in a 'semantic struggle to uncover and transform the meanings unavoidably shaping one's identity and self-understanding', it is also necessary to explore the affective politics of that such practice demands (Kompridis 2006: 73), and to realise that these must be collective projects.

It is not coincidental that one of the most influential theories of radical democracy – ‘agonistic pluralism’ – shares a root with the word ‘agony’. Although this evokes a sense of struggling through an ordeal with excruciating slowness, it refers more obliquely to an athletic competition that is ‘oriented not merely toward victory or defeat, but emphasises the importance of struggle itself’ and within which, therefore, a mutual respect for the existence and efforts of one’s opponents is implied. ‘Disagreement, conflict and struggle’, undertaken as mutually constitutive processes within an atmosphere of recognition, are therefore all central elements of agonistic politics (Chambers 2001). But this runs against the grain of popular understandings of democracy as indexed not only to a good life of equity, egalitarianism and autonomy, but to consensus, pleasure and conviviality as well. Democracy is meant to be the system that makes life *less* of a struggle; it is not supposed to hurt or be scary. But within the framework of an agonistic politics, this pleasurable imaginary of democratic life neglects at its peril the deep mechanisms of power – material, discursive, affective, social – that work despite, within and above all through all the procedural methods and forms of governance that are often intended to eradicate them.

If taken seriously, the demands of radical democracy are thus simultaneously emancipatory and demanding. Simon Critchley has argued that they are in fact *infinitely demanding*, once we decide that living politically necessitates a ‘continual questioning from below of any attempt to impose order from above’ – and, although he does not say so, of any attempt to impose order from within and amongst ourselves (2007: 13, 40). It is infinite because the ethical demand to radicalise democratic relations with others and with the world *cannot be fulfilled*: we can never fully ‘know’ the other, never plumb the depths of consciousness or communicative meaning, never permanently short-circuit the circulation of power, never delineate the rhizomatic proliferation of possibilities and blockages, and never be excused from attending to the demands of others that divide us from ourselves. Critchley asks: ‘how can the extremity of the ethical picture [he] has described be borne without crushing the ethical subject? How can I respond to the infinite responsibility to the other without extinguishing myself as a subject?’ (2007: 69) Megan Boler puts the question in a different way: how can we encourage people to take up oppositional positions when they are ‘deeply invested in the dominant cultural values that these values have defined their sense of identity and to question these values feels emotionally like an annihilation of self’? (2004: 119) And in Kompridis’s (2011) simpler terms: is it fair to ask people to work on themselves to make democracy work?

Given the intense demands on the subject and on communities, how might radical democratic politics become desirable and emancipatory for all? While critical theories of radical democracy are inspiring, they often skirt serious treatment of the affective labour that it requires, and make few references to cultural work that really does create possibilities for such ways of thinking, acting and being to flourish and become viable. If new modes of political engagement are to be oriented towards ‘enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity’, we need to understand more than we do about the subjectivities, relationships, spaces, epistemologies, knowledges, affects and languages that are conducive to this project.

Seeking the elusive subjects of radical democracy

The demands to *be ready* to resist, confront, listen, to be radically open or receptive to others and otherness, to be intellectually and emotionally reflexive are, in a sense, demands that critical theory has always made. The quest for conditions favouring the creation of critical and revolutionary subjects has preoccupied, and continues to preoccupy, writers in the Frankfurt School, anarchist, poststructuralist and feminist traditions of critical theory. This is perhaps exemplified by Marcuse's 'life-long search for a revolutionary subjectivity, for a sensibility that would revolt against the existing society and attempt to create a new one' (Kellner 2002).

As Kompridis argues, 'receptivity [to change] is a condition for the possibility of critique' (2011). This is simply another way of stating a fundamental problem within critical theory: can a critical theory of society ever be intelligible or legitimate in situations where there is no 'pre-theoretical resource for emancipation' (Honneth 2007: 64); or, must we want or need to be critical before it is possible for us to be so, and are there any cultural practices that expand this space of possibility? For example, it has been argued that in order to 'give the standards of critique an objective foothold in pre-theoretical praxis', learning must respond *to*, rather than *cultivate* or *produce*, a desire for freedom that is presumed to exist pre-politically in a 'non-pathological' state (Honneth 2007: 35 and 66). Throughout the critical-theoretical tradition, the *absence* of the will to critique, the *lack* of the desire to struggle against limitations and to transcend existing circumstances, has been treated as a 'pathology' created by the alienating and exploitative forces of capitalism, and by the dehumanising forces of authoritarian forms of state and social power. Ernst Bloch, for example, insisted that 'expectation, hope [and] intention towards possibility that has still not become...is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely and correctly grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole' (Bloch 1991: 7); Paulo Freire that 'the absence of hope is not the "normal" way to be human, [but] a distortion' (Freire 1998: 69).¹⁶

This deficit view of the human subject sets up a Herculean task of rehumanising people who have been divested of a natural will to critique and transcend their existing limitations. The implication of it is that really significant changes are therefore only made possible through crisis and diremption; in moments that rupture the 'vicious circle', and in a 'breakdown of the interpretive scheme, the framework of intelligibility through which an individual had hitherto made sense of herself' (Kompridis 2006: 64). It is argued that a critical consciousness of such moments of crisis create an intensified engagement with space and time in which we become compelled to reflect critically on how we reproduce, reject or transform the cultural practices that shape our world. In this reading, the transformative potential of crisis emerges from experiences of being 'decentred' in ways we neither choose nor control; outcomes are unpredictable, spontaneous and surprising. Feeling out of place, uncomfortable, unrecognisable, regarded as a threat to sacred normalities—or as Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, the 'bad conscience' of one's own time and society (cited in Kompridis, 2006: 5) – can provoke a state of heightened reflexivity in which we realize that our bodies, truths and ways of being do not fit the contours of a dominant reality and the reality could be otherwise (Ahmed 2004: 152).

The experience of crisis is thus regarded as a moment in which objective possibility is made subjectively possible, 'when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future' (Ahmed 2004: 184). What initiates such a crisis is 'a breakdown of the interpretive scheme, the framework of intelligibility through which an individual had hitherto made sense of herself. In such a crisis we experience that very sense of obscurity, the threat of incoherence, that prompts the fear that we are unable to comprehend and thereby formulate the demands to which we feel ourselves vaguely subject' (Kompridis 2006: 64). Crisis occupies a central role in the history of critical thought and politics primarily because it is regarded as an intellectually and affectively motivating force (Kompridis 2006; Stahler 2008).

This somewhat mechanistic theory of the linkages between critique, hope and social transformation is philosophically persuasive, but its translation into life is problematic. The social and affective foundations of this model of critique are situated and embodied, and distributed unequally throughout society in the usual ways. John Holloway, for example, suggests that anyone has the potential to become a critical theorist whenever we have the 'almost unbearable' realisation that we cannot fit into the world; that we are 'others' living 'in the wrong place, in the wrong sort of society' (2008: 14). And, as Lorraine Hansberry argues, 'the thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely' (1969, cited in Hill Collins 1991: 268).

But such questions of affectivity and care, which are central to radical democracy and the dismantling of capitalist relations and logics, are not only marginalised within critical theory but often regarded as irrelevant to, or produced by, 'real' politics and political forces. The dominant model of the 'crisis thinker' still remains an ideal-type subject: an unattached, dissident intellectual; implicitly masculine, elite and professionally intellectual, for whom it is possible and justifiable – or even desirable or necessary – to live in contradiction to everything and everyone, and to make his own existential suffering into an object or a virtue for conceptual analysis. The problem with this account of 'crisis thinking' is that it conflates breaking *through* with breaking *down* – a distinction that critical cultural workers are much quicker to make. As David, an art educator reflected, 'at times when you get that sense that somebody's really had a breakthrough, or somebody's really been moved by something you do, that's the greatest, I mean that's an extraordinary experience to have'. But, he continued, this often incurs a 'cost of doing the work on the person who's performing or teaching'. In order to experience ruptures as moments of possibility rather than merely as threats to existence, a person must be able to distance herself from the dominant sources of meaning and recognition, and to survive doing so within the possibilities and constraints of her concrete social conditions. According to Kompridis, it is by cultivating this sensibility and these capabilities that she will be able to embrace a wider range of practices that 'facilitate the enlargement of meaning and possibility', which in their turn should expand the availability of confidence and hope (ibid. 136), which in turn enable the 'injection of new beginnings in public', which is what ultimately makes transformative action possible (ibid.). However, she must have the social, affective and material resources to live 'in contradiction to [her] time', and to live with the dissonance this is likely to create both internally and in existing social relationships (Kompridis 2006: 5, 267).

These references to agony, unbearable modes of existence, and loneliness alert us to the possibility that the ‘pathologies’ which critical theorists have struggled so long against – the fear of freedom in particular – are not necessarily pathological at all. The fear of the new, the uncertain, the uncomfortable and the unfamiliar are not only explicable; moreover, ‘the desire to order chaos through simplified schemas, to ward off the felt dangers of ambiguity, seems perhaps more “human” a characteristic than any other’ (Boler 1999: 176).¹⁷ As John Dewey argued, ‘the live creature demands order in his living but he also demands novelty.’ However, ‘the difficult becomes objectionable only when instead of challenging energy it overwhelms and blocks it’ (Dewey 1932: 173). Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work illustrates beautifully how the destabilisation of equilibrium between that which we can consciously apprehend and make sense of (our ‘mental’ awareness of the world) and the preconscious experiences that frame and orient our experiences even though we cannot make sense of them (our ‘vital’ awareness’) produces an acute ‘awareness of our contingency’ that can be not only intellectually disorienting but sometimes even physically disruptive – an experience that manifests as ‘pathological’ – as well (in Addison 2011: 368). Intense emotions of the sort that radical democracy not only accommodates but demands can mobilise people or paralyse them; destabilise or maintain the status quo (Wilkinson 2009).

There is a thus need within critical cultural and political projects to prioritise the theorisation of the intellectual, affective, relational and ethical labour that is necessary (but never sufficient) for subjective and collective transformation.¹⁸ Despite the ubiquity of ‘feelings of despair or personal fragility’ as a result of engaging in critical cultural activities, for example, the affective politics of critique are seldom regarded as serious political or cultural work (ibid. 31) and, at times, are systematically denied or repressed (Brown and Pickerill 2009; Muray 2012; Wilkinson 2009: 39).¹⁹ As one ecological justice activist remarked,

‘[I am working with] people who have lost everything and have suffered immensely and you have a responsibility to these people. You know, I think all of that builds a kind of very, very strong pressure, and navigating around these areas is really

¹⁷ This is perhaps what Adorno was attempting to argue in his comments on the improbability of educating ‘empathy’ or ‘love’. For him, ‘coldness’ (or an inability to empathise with others beyond one’s own self interest) was as intrinsic a part of human nature as altruism within post-war German society. ‘If coldness were not a fundamental trait of anthropology’, he argued, ‘if people were not profoundly indifferent toward whatever happens to everyone else except for a few to whom they are closely bound and, if possible, by tangible interests, then Auschwitz would not have been possible, people would not have accepted it’. He added that ‘warmth among people, which everyone longs for, has never been present at all, except during short periods and in very small groups’ (1967: 8). This was important for Adorno because he believed that ‘if anything can help against coldness as the condition for disaster, then it is the insight into the conditions that determine it and the attempt to combat those conditions, initially in the domain of the individual’ (1967: 9).

¹⁸ Such work is *necessary* because it shapes the conditions of possibility in which things can happen; it is *not sufficient* because human beings cannot engineer or manipulate the *total* conditions of possibility for things to happen, and indeed can control very few of them once factors such as non-conscious; unconscious; constellation; power; histories of place; the subjectivity, agency and needs of others; and chance are taken into consideration.

¹⁹ A contrast to this is the centrality of *politica afectiva* or affective politics in Latin America, which is a new form of politics that ‘establishes a new territory of spatiality...that generated a certain kind of new interpersonal relationship’, and of an ‘openness that is sustainable’ (Martin K. from Asamblea Colegiales, cited in Brown and Pickerill 2009: 32).

complicated. I've never really talked about these things in a 'public' way. [...] I will talk about the issues, I will talk about the scenes, if you like, but, I won't really talk about the personal effect it has on people who do that work. And, I don't think we're really educated, or brought up to talk in that way. [...] I did once raise it, only once, in public. [...] I remember at [a] conference saying, 'why do we never seem able to talk about ... the effect it has when we do this work? [...] A lot of people came up and said, 'thank you so much for saying that, because, people, especially men, don't often say that'. [We] don't connect up the different aspects.'

Until these forms of immaterial labour and experience are acknowledged as serious politics, it is unlikely that they will be sustainable or that radical democracy will become a viable alternative to neoliberal capitalism or a force in its dismantling. Spaces for the cultivation of *liveable* radical democratic subjectivities, relationships and practices must be created if neoliberalism or any other hegemonic social form is to be challenged or dismantled. And I suggest that the creation and expansion of such spaces is best understood as pedagogical work.²⁰

Pedagogy, prefiguration, radical democracy

Democracy can be understood as a pedagogical activity if politics itself is understood as a process of learning and discovery. Indeed, we may understand all forms of political rationality as pedagogical. Neoliberalism itself is a 'constructive project' that does not presume all social life is or can be organised along market principles, including that which had previously been in non-economic domains, but aggressively constructs institutions, policies and human beings that can then become persuaded or forced to organise it in this way (Brown 2005; Giroux 2002). For Kompridis, the question facing critical theorists today is therefore how we can

'grasp as learning...those accomplishments through which we acquire new tongues with which to say what cannot be said and new ears with which to hear that which cannot be heard, accomplishments through which we overcome epistemological crises, and partial, one-sided interpretations of ourselves and others and accomplishments through which we are able to "go on" learning from our interaction with one another and our interaction with the "world"' (2006: 236).

Dewey argued more specifically that democratic practice is itself pedagogical in so far as – like any genuine experience – it renders a person 'more sensitive and responsive to certain conditions, and relatively immune to those things about him that would have been stimuli if he had made another choice' (Dewey 1938: 37).²¹ Democratic education is therefore oriented not towards the accomplishment of predetermined learning objectives or mastery of predefined bodies of knowledge, but rather towards the 'directed development of the

²⁰ This argument draws in part on Peter Mayo's (2002) reading of Gramsci's theory of hegemony as a fundamentally pedagogical project, as well as on theories of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux xxxx; Sandlin *et al.* 2011).

²¹ In his 'Essay on liberation', Marcuse (1967) makes a similar argument in that a 'new sensibility' might be developed through engaging in practices that effect 'a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a non-aggressive, non-exploitative world'.

possibilities inherent in ordinary experience' (Dewey 1938: 89).²² And, in Dewey's terms, 'the end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal, and cultural' (Dewey 1939).

For this reason, struggles for autonomy and democratic social change value the creation of alternative 'institutions of knowledge, of creation, of care, of invention and of education that are autonomous from capital', and in which such types of experience may be possible (Day 2005; Federici 2011; Graeber 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Such projects have also played an important role in articulating 'an expanded concept of struggle, one that emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and of contests over meaning in the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic power relations' (Cote *et al.* 2007: 5). In recent years, there has been a pedagogical turn in European activist politics as social movements in the global North incorporate popular-education techniques of self-education, collective reflexivity and the collaborative systematisation of knowledge in more regular ways (Motta 2011; Scandrett 2010; Scathach 2012). However, while popular education can facilitate conscientisation, it does not always enable the robust theorisation of the ontological, affective or social foundations of new knowledge and practices. Indeed, in certain senses, this is not its purpose. Nor do we find this depth of understanding in Theodor Adorno's somewhat abstract suggestion that while we cannot rid society of brutality, once we understand the mechanisms, 'education and enlightenment can still manage a little something' to minimise its development and legitimisation (1967: 10).²³ There is an educational need today, in

²² Another way of explaining this is through Kompridis's distinction between defining politics as the 'art of possibilities', on the one hand, and as 'the art of disclosing possibilities', on the other (2011: 256). The first limits itself to the horizons of *extant* and thinkable possibilities, whereas the latter seeks to transgress and extend them.

²³ Adorno also understood the pedagogical nature of desire, but mindful of the role that schools played in cultivating fascist subjectivities during his lifetime he remained wary of projects of subject transformation. Nevertheless, he asserted that encouraging independent critical thinking and empathy was the only real defence against an insurgent "barbarism [which] is inscribed within the principle of civilization" (Adorno, 1967: 1). For "if anything can help against coldness as the condition for disaster", he wrote, "then it is the insight into the conditions that determine it and the attempt to combat those conditions, initially in the domain of the individual" (1967: 9). Here, Adorno parts company with Bloch, Fromm and Marcuse, all of whom suggested that education was a corrective for the distortions of human nature which were wrought by capitalist logic and authoritarian relationships. For Adorno, the problem was grimmer: Auschwitz, the Armenian genocide and the dropping of atomic bombs were not anomalous events that could be attributed to miseducation. Rather, he argued they were "expressions of an extremely powerful societal tendency" towards dehumanization that is an ever-present potentiality within human beings, emboldened under some conditions and more repressed in others. Dominant pedagogical practices did not *make* people "cold" or unable to love others, but they reinforced and educated these affective conditions. Adorno's response was not, however, to advocate a counter-pedagogy of love. He understood on the one hand that it would be an authoritarian irony to demand that people love, and on the other that there was little mileage in appealing liberally to "eternal values, at which the very people who are prone to commit such atrocities would merely shrug their shoulders". But a critical education that problematised these tendencies in a dialectical way could, he thought, illuminate 'the conditions that determine [emotional coldness] and the attempt to combat those conditions, initially in the domain of the individual', and that this might in some way help 'bring coldness to the consciousness of itself' (Adorno, 1967: 9; Lewis, 2006a, 2006b). This footnote is excerpted from Amsler (2011).

projects for radical democracy and post-capitalist futures, that neither popular education nor critical pedagogy can fulfil.

An alternative to both pragmatic knowledge production and elite theorisation suggests that education, in the broadest and deepest sense, is one of our most important means for pursuing individual and collective projects of humanisation and flourishing; that it is one of our richest sites of philosophical and theoretical insight into these projects, and that it is a valuable and powerful site of intellectual and political resistance and transformation.²⁴ It is not particularly radical to argue that we need types of education which help people achieve states of genuine political and intellectual autonomy, satisfy the need for flourishing social collectivities, foster egalitarian relations of economic organisation, encourage creative experimentation, and cultivate a general reflexivity of self and hospitality to otherness. In Left politics, education is also called upon to respond to some more specific problems and desires: to either take control of or disinvest from institutions that are not democratically accountable; to challenge forms of power that operate through people's desires to be recognised, moral and useful; to challenge deterministic ontologies (what Fielding and Moss [2011] call the 'dictatorship of no alternatives') which stunt both critique and the radical imagination; to cultivate 'negative capabilities' that allow people to engage critically and openly with difference and difficulty; and to create critical-practical knowledge that is not detached from everyday life and which empowers human efficacy in social affairs. What does such work look like here now, in circumstances where critiques of society orbit around the increasing damages of neoliberal rationality and the limits of 'post-democratic' institutions – including, in some cases, educational?

For inspiration, I would like to draw on some work being done by socially engaged educators, artists and activists in the UK, which deals directly with the ontological, epistemological, affective and material conditions of learning new ways of thinking, feeling, doing and being. One environmental activist whom I interviewed refers to this as the 'beautiful stuff behind the scenes', and it has striking resonances with critical-theoretical concepts of reflective receptivity, subjective transformation, agency and possibility. I am speaking here of practices that can tap into the 'affectual, the experiential, the cultural and the spiritual' dimensions of experience in order to transform 'the way that knowledge is created away from its representation in the figure of the abstracted and disembodied intellectual to a process of embodied (in the community and in the self) collective construction that is inseparable from action' (Motta 2012).

Unfortunately, these concerns are often marginalised in critical and radical theory. And yet, this very type of work is playing a significant role in helping people to 'facilitate the enlargement of meaning and possibility', and ultimately to either mediate transformative experience or makes transformative action possible (Kompridis 2006: 136). Indeed, as Anna Marie Smith argues,

²⁴ Education-in-its-broadest sense' is a term borrowed from Michael Fielding and Peter Moss (2011). It bears similarities to Continental notions of 'social pedagogy' which see education as 'fostering and supporting the general well-being and development of children and young people, and their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a good life' (46). This is contrasted to education-in-its-narrower sense, which is about schooling, formal learning, and mainly compartmentalised cognitive subjects (47).

'radical democratic pluralist theory must provide the tools that would allow democratic activists who are engaged in the struggles against capitalist exploitation, sexism, racism and homophobia to map out the context of those struggles, namely the given configurations of power relations. We should, however, acknowledge the fact that democratic activists are already engaged in this important work; radical democratic theory needs to learn from their activism and to keep pace with their valuable innovations. In any event, radical democratic pluralist theory cannot stop short with a model based on "scientific" abstractions, however elegant they may be. What is needed is a theory of social structures and identity formation that explores the complex ways in which the multiple forms of exploitation and oppression intersect, overlap, combine together, shape one another and contradict one another' (Smith 1998: 40).

In the spirit of advancing this project, I would like to offer a few illustrations of how pedagogies of *invention*, *emergence* and *becoming* (Dewey 2005); *encounter* and *discomfort* (Boler 1999, 2004; Boler and Zembylas 2003); and *sociality* and *community* (hooks 2003); and of *hope* (Bloch 1991; Freire 2000; Giroux 2002) inform the development of prefigurative, radical-democratic practices in the areas of popular arts, education and cultural activism in the UK. I will then suggest some of the problems and limitations of this work, and consider how we might evaluate its significance for the renewal of radical democratic politics in everyday life.

Pedagogies of invention, emergence and becoming

The idea of democracy implies both change and improvement; it is normative and utopian in that its only real justification is that it promises the possibility of open and alternative futures which are not fixed in tradition, lines of authority, laws and etc. It is based on a faith that existing arrangements, values, boundaries and etc. can be otherwise given the will of people to make them so. Democracy is in this sense the only political arrangement that is commensurate with the ontological character of possibility itself, as it 'cannot be fixed' and is not an object but a 'function of the vocabulary in which it is expressed' (255). Kompridis thus redefines democratic politics not as the 'art of possibility' but as the 'art of disclosing possibilities' (2006: 256).

When cultural workers attempt to explain the social problems to which they are responding, they often speak of the foreclosure of existing institutions and conditions for possibilities, reducing pluralistic ways of being and obscuring critical ways of seeing; the 'hardening' of classrooms, the fragmenting of immigrant communities. In some situations the forces of foreclosure, despair and disempowerment are so great that the project of 'opening' space is prioritised. If we are so concerned with the foreclosure of spaces for being and becoming otherwise, it makes sense to attend to how people learn to invent or create (subjectivities, questions, solutions to problems, art, relationships, spaces, imaginaries, theories), to emerge. The question is, what sort of practices have the actual potential to expand an individual's existing horizons of intelligibility and possibility, and more significantly to shatter the wider 'dictatorship of no alternatives' to dominant political and economic structures? Can we teach or learn 'becoming'?

I asked Gary, a traditional storyteller, a similar question. Interestingly, he could not initially make sense of it. He thought for a while, and then asked: 'but isn't all education transformative?' This question highlights the basic fact that the meaning of 'education' is not

self evident, and that some processes of learning are, as Dewey argued, '*mis-educative*'. Here, however, I am interested in the education that refers only to experiences of learning and discovery which *open possibilities for further experiences* of learning and discovery (1938: 27). Dewey also distinguishes between two types of experience: those which are immediate experiences (for example, of pleasure or displeasure) and those which are longer-term and which 'live on' in other experiences. As the *effects of experience* are not self-evident in either case, the 'central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences' (28).

Pedagogies of becoming therefore tend to prioritise two types of work: creative and aesthetic work ('art', in the broad sense), and dialogical and relational work ('conversation', in the broad sense). Both of these aim to create *spaces, times* and *opportunities* for openness, on the one hand, and *possibilities* for people to engage in more open-ended, imaginative and non-essentialist ways of learning and being together, on the other.

Beth teaches basic language skills to refugees and children of refugees in South London; she is also concerned with their political rights and welfare. She describes why the product of communication, which is the explicit subject matter, is less important than the process of learning and gaining confidence in new forms of what she calls 'real' dialogue, where people are talking and listening to each other in ways that are not pre-emptive or predetermined, and which can be expanded into other areas of life.²⁵ You can only 'see yourself changing', Beth claims, when people shift from their habitual ways of talking about issues with each other to 'real dialogue' – 'and that', she said, 'is where the attempt to close down thought, the attempt to close down ideas, opinions, is counteracted. I think the sort of reading in a collective voice...other ideas come from that.'

What Beth describes easily qualifies as a practice that Kompridis refers to as 'intimate critique',

'a practice of critical dialogue that aims to preserve and renew trust, and to facilitate a commitment to ongoing processes of cooperative problem solving [...] based on the recognition and performative acknowledgement that we are the facilitators and guarantors of one another's fragile freedom...to criticize and innovate...' (2006: 262).

Other artists try more deliberately to create work which opens space for experiences that foster experience, both subjective and social. A major objective of such relational work is to 'create the capacity to recognize, through questioning and listening, to make the

²⁵ Attention to how work done in discrete educational spaces connects to other parts of life, however, is important. According to Dewey, 'as an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. Otherwise the course of experience is disorderly, since the individual factor that enters into making an experience is split. A divided world, a world whose parts and aspects do not hang together, is at once a sign and a cause of a divided personality. When the splitting-up reaches a certain point we call the person insane. A fully integrated personality, on the other hand, exists only when successive experiences are integrated with one another. It can be built up only as a world of related objects is constructed' (Dewey 1938: 44).

preparations for a participant – and themselves – to see a disclosure of something not already known, which was collectively created, and not already fixed’ (Heim 2003: 191).²⁶ As David reflects, these were most effective when they integrated intellectual or cognitive with affective and emotional work. One of his most powerful exhibitions was:

‘not just about ‘information’ transfer, [but about] hearing about, seeing me walking through a landscape, [for example] walking from Goethe’s summer house in Weimar to Buchenvald, the concentration camp...counting the number of steps between those places, reading testimony on the way, from civilisation to barbarism, in a short afternoon walk. [...] And then they had the experience with the other people who’d been through that experience—on [a] boat [ride which was part of the exhibition]. And then we had feedback days afterwards when people from the different events could come together and people could talk to me, or they’d write to me separately and I’d email or we’d exchange or we’d meet up, and so, a multitude of dialogues came out of those events.’

In another context, Jill, who is an environmental activist, popular educator and teacher of art teachers, explained the significance of creativity for radical democratic possibilities. ‘Art can act in a very slow and sometimes ineffable way’, she said, ‘a way that can’t be predicted or described’. Its ineffability is understood to stem from the affective logic of autonomous creative practice. Because affective influence cannot be easily intentional or controlled, ‘art is not synonymous with legislative force, it cannot oblige us to act, its register is affective, not prescriptive’ (Meskimmon 2011: 8, cited in Addison 2012: 365). It ‘enters from without (from others, the environment) and does things to us’, and at the same time ‘is a force through which we impact others: our presence, energies and actions attract attention and elicit responses, resulting in movements oriented towards or away from us’ (Addison 2012: 370).²⁷ Because the process of making art does not inherently ‘have quantifiable change attached to it’, creating space for this type of work is regarded as one way of creating a limited ‘outside’ to the dominant logics of exchange value, hierarchy and quantifiable targets of activity which characterise neoliberal and managerial forms of control.²⁸

²⁶ Following Gadamer, we may understand conversation as the primary work of art (Heim 2003: 184).

²⁷ ‘Despite the privileging of cognitive development in education, humans are evidently not merely cognitive beings. Rather we are embodied creatures, beings who feel, think and act through the body on other bodies and are in turn affected’ (Addison 2012: 375).

²⁸ Although it is ‘one of the most fundamental and most necessary of all concepts of social and political theory’, disclosive critique is a nebulous phenomenon (Kompridis 2006: 109). Kompridis makes very clear that disclosure of possibility is not a ‘capacity that can be “administered”’; that there is ‘no empirical methodology for learning how to disclose a world’; that it cannot be ‘transmitted as such technologies and skills are daily transmitted in art schools, music schools, and the like’; ‘not a kind of knowledge, or even a kind of doing, that is objectifiable and formalizable’ (Kompridis 2006: 108; see also 117); not ‘a technique, a distinctive way of using language over which we can dispose at will, something that can be “administered”, and not always linguistic (222); not ‘implicit, rule-governed knowledge that can be reconstructed the way that rule-governed use of language can be reconstructed’ (108–9); not a form of procedural argumentation (118) or rhetorical strategy (119, 221); above all not a tool (221); possibility is ‘not something whose conditions of possibility...we can fully and explicitly state; it is not something that can be empirically surveyed and demarcated’ (198); decentring is neither a skill nor form of mastery, and is generally resisted because it hurts (214) -- and thus Habermas’s argument that ‘the enterprises of art and literature...administer world-disclosing capacities’ (cited in Kompridis 2006: 108) is ‘nothing more than a stab in the dark’. It is thus not accessible or verifiable through sociological hypotheses and procedures. But this does not mean that it cannot be a form of philosophical argument, if this is defined more broadly (119). Indeed it must be, if the capacity to begin a new is fundamental for democracy and any sort of human agency (197).

Cultural workers have other ways of facilitating such disclosures. Storytelling, for example, offers a medium through which people can liberate their imagination and desire, and telling stories can be 'a way of reconstructing reality, and sometimes, it also enables the healing of deep wounds' (Motta 2011). The radical potential of this, in situations where people are either repressed in states of domination or paralysed by experiences of mystification and disempowerment, is that 'it breaks across your pattern of feelings. It opens up the possibility of new feelings. It opens up the possibility of...you know, most fairy tales have very optimistic outcomes. [...] [Y]ou have a sense that achievement is possible.' As Peggy reflected,

'anything can happen in the story. You don't have any prejudice about what might happen because it could be completely different; whereas if you are thinking about a person, you already have a prejudice against that person. In a story, magical things can happen. Somebody can change into a frog. You know that's what happens in a story. So you are not even necessarily surprised by it. You are more open.'

The importance of disrupting habituated patterns of feeling, thinking and being for opening spaces of becoming otherwise also lies at the heart of forum theatre and other participatory performances. As Adam said, 'when people get off their chairs and sort of break the mould of how we are, physically, I think it opens up all kinds of things in your body and your memories and in your – well, everything. The whole gamut, your whole being, whole body subjectness'.

These micro, or localised possibility-enabling practices should not be dismissed, as they have been in the past, as cultural 'pseudo-politics' which reproduce relations of social domination by pretending to autonomy when they are always-already co-opted, on the one hand, or claiming social relevance when they are deeply detached from everyday life and political possibility, on the other. The concern, from Adorno to Habermas, has been that autonomous existence is either impossible or traded off in exchange for self-imposed irrelevance, despite Adorno's rescuing of the revolutionary potential of art as a form of negative dialectics (Melaney 1997).²⁹ The argument is that

'when released from demands for justification internal to proper everyday practices, art and literature can go about creating "autonomous" worlds of meaning that release subjects from their ordinary routines, and from everyday modes of perception and action: validity based speech and action, speech based on reason, goes on holiday' (Kompridis 2006: 107).

My argument, however, is not only that the practices described above *are* embedded in everyday life, but also that it is a philosophical fallacy to presume we could ever really be outside the problems of 'the real world'. Nor should these practices be disregarded as superficial exercises in affirmative futurity, if it is indeed the case that

Note that the agency he notes is a 'radically noninstrumental' one (203), just as disclosure is a *non-instrumental* and *noninstrumentalizable* activity that is fundamentally different from propaganda (221).

²⁹ 'Works of art were purposeful because they were dynamic fatalities wherein all individual moments exist for the purpose of fulfilling the moments or redeeming them negatively. Works were purposeless because they fall outside the means-end relation governing the empirical world' (Adorno in Melaney 1997: 42).

'the democratic future that we're after is actually a future that we will only be able to make by opening the present differently. I think that many of us experience the present as terribly closed—not just closed because certain options have been foreclosed, but also closed because of certain stoppages in progressive history. I think the opening that we have to cultivate is a kind of affective and intellectual opening to political possibility that would help us read the present differently.' (Brown 2006: 41).

As a long line of critical theorists has argued, such 'thinking from a new stance is essential to the democratic form of life' (Kompridis 2006: 262). Making room for and being answerable to 'the call of an other' means that we are 'facilitating its voicing, letting it become a voice that we did not allow ourselves to hear before' and consider doing things that did not occur (Kompridis 2006: 262).

In order to do this, we must allow ourselves to be decentred. But we are not 'naturally' receptive to receptivity, or hospitable to critique, or confident in creativity; even less so in conditions of the capitalist everyday (Kompridis 2006: 257).³⁰ It is thus more comfortable to work in homogenous groups which, for whatever reason, already value and cultivate these practices and sensibilities. As Beth pointed out, even in the microcosmic world of a diverse language classroom, genuine dialogue does not emerge organically or easily, or sometimes at all. Opportunities for its emergence must be facilitated, organised and held. 'Because of power dynamics in the classroom', she remarked, 'trying to create a democratic space depends on a huge range of participatory tools and techniques', and is a demanding, laborious and often frustrating type of work. Similarly, we know that '[m]aking and looking at works of art is potentially a transformative event through which an engagement with alterity (the other) motivates us to act differently, whether that difference is cognitive, affective or cognitive (relating to acts of will or, in contemporary sociological terms, agency) in its effects' (Addison 2012: 365). But as one artist points out, conversations about art can also 'reinforce prefigured views', particularly where they are disembedded from everyday life and meaningful relationships.

The question of what accounts for the difference between possibility-enabling and possibility-foreclosing, or transformative and reproductive experiences, thus lies at the heart of the problem of radical democracy. If we embrace such pedagogies of becoming, we therefore also need to simultaneously develop pedagogies of encounter and, in many cases, discomfort.

Pedagogies of encounter and discomfort

To re-imagine our own individual and collective limits of understanding and possibility – what Paulo Freire called our 'limit situations' – requires learning to experience troublesome knowledge and uncomfortable encounters with otherness and critique 'not [as] the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibility

³⁰ Kompridis defines this as 'an everyday whose rhythms of work and consumption are dictated by the imperatives of money and power, actively erase the presence of the extraordinary within the ordinary, displacing it from the everyday, turning it contrary to the everyday, and fixedly identifying the everyday with sobriety, joyless sacrifice, and boredom' (2006: 114–15).

begin', and not as a 'frontier which separates being from nothingness, but the frontier which separates being from being more' (Vieria Pinto in Freire 2000: 99).

Critical theory has tended to begin from the position that this sensibility is a necessary precondition for critique and transformative practice. Megan Boler, who has spent more than a decade developing a theory of 'pedagogies of discomfort', begins from a different place by asking 'what we – educators and students – stand to gain by engaging in the discomforting process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions?' (1999: 176) Her answer is that in doing so, we learn how our emotional investments in certain knowledges, practices, ways of knowing, disciplines, power structures and identities have been 'insidiously woven in the everyday fabric of common sense'. This is not about feeling good. The experience of being decentred is 'genuinely uncomfortable, unsettling, which is why, understandably, it is resisted' (Kompridis 2006: 214). Boler's understanding of pedagogy is thus not simply a theory of *education*, but one of the 'interrelationships of how we see' the word, 'as well as [of] the emotional selectivity that shapes what and how we see' (1999: 182). It also implies a materialist analysis of knowledge, as a 'pedagogy of discomfort is about bodies, about particulars, about the "real" material of the world we live in' because 'beliefs are "embodied habits", dispositions to act in a certain way in a given context' (Boler 1999: 196).

bell hooks has also raised the point that 'it is fashionable these days, when "difference" is a hot topic in progressive circles, to talk about "hybridity" and "border crossing", but we often have no concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection and shared concern with teaching practices' (hooks 1993: 124). The question therefore arises: what sorts of practices have the potential to make us more *receptive* to discomfort as a critical emotion, and to strengthen our capabilities to engage critically and generously in encounters with difference, ambiguity and unfamiliarity? Can we teach or learn to be both radically open and autonomously discerning?

Again, the salience of this question for radical-democratic politics is clarified by cultural workers' reflections on the lengths they go to in order to create conditions in which such learning is possible, as well as on the limitations and resistances to this that they encounter in their own practice. There is often a fraught tension between the aim to disrupt common sense, cherished truths and comfort zones, on the one hand, and to create experiences which are possibility-enabling, on the other. This is particularly difficult to negotiate in situations where there are high levels of individualisation and social fragmentation, precisely because this condition plays a major role in the cultures of fear that cultivate conservatism. One popular educator working in a Palestinian neighbourhood explained how simply striking up ordinary conversations with people whom we do not already know or with whom we are in conflict can be a radical intervention as it problematises rigid and bureaucratic roles and sensibilities, and challenges the compartmentalisation of people and our emotions.

This matters because there are shrinking few possibilities for people to engage in critical thought or practice together, or what Alan referred to as 'constructive' or 'creative' conflict. In our society, he suggests, 'there is a feeling that conflict is bad and that 'what we need to do is all row the same way and...read off the same hymn book and just need to make tweaks'. Returning to the theories of radical democracy, we can see the profoundly anti-democratic implications of this position. For Dewey,

'a genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other –a suppression which is none the less one of violence when it takes place by psychological means of ridicule, abuse, intimidation, instead of by overt imprisonment or in concentration camps. To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life' (Dewey 1938: 232).

Adam, a popular educator who practices forum theatre with community groups, believes that constructive or creative conflict is 'the basis for any democracy', and, as he feels it is 'probably what has been stripped away from our lives', that is an important site for educational work. He assumes that people are naturally cooperative, but have few opportunities to be in 'physical spaces where people are able to come together and exchange ideas, feel respected and feel that there are possibilities out there other than just staying on a track'. Such spaces, however, must not mimic habitual attempts to break down, erase or assimilate difference, or to garner consensus, but rather to work with and through difference in order to create something new. This means facilitating 'respectful but perhaps really intense debates about [in his work] class, race, privilege, popular education, direct action', with the challenge being to create 'forms and spaces where that can happen respectfully but not with the edges knocked off, not where everything becomes so polite that you're not saying what you actually need to say or want to say'. Constructive conflict, he argues, is precisely what 'generates ideas, generates energy that goes off in directions that you hadn't really anticipated'; it is also 'where the energy to do stuff emerges out of'; it is what enables the pursuit of 'unfinished' democratic practice. 'We should not be disappointed', he said, 'if kumbaya is not going to be sung at the end'. The point is to ask why. 'What does this do to us now as a group? How do we reorganise, how do we accommodate for this position, this feeling?' His interest is therefore in 'how people make spaces to come together, to exchange...and what are the barriers to that happening, and the limits'.

Like other popular educators and activists, Adam deploys a range of 'participatory tools and techniques' towards this end. In particular, he is interested in types of performance which are 'stripped back to just using interaction and using our bodies to surface things that maybe we hadn't even realised were there', and exploring 'the process of using our bodies to create, to express, and then [asking] how those expressions change collectively'. He illustrated the richness of such processes by describing how a single gesture could become 'a source of debate and interaction' as people interpret what it means and could mean together. Another popular educator similarly suggested that theatre is a particularly productive medium of encounter because it is so multidimensional – affective, cultural, psychological, embodied, physical and intellectual, mirroring the multidimensionality of power itself. For La Máscara, a Colombian feminist theater and popular education group, this work happens in spaces that 'facilitate free play within a space that values people's life experience, diversity and expressions and which communities have the time and space to reflect upon their realities and experiment with their transformation' within the context of their everyday lives (Motta 2011). Such activities can 'make people take risks, but in gentle ways where they decide the level of risk they want to take. So these processes are valuable in and of themselves' (Greg

2012).

The potentially transformative power of non-diremptive risk was also asserted by Greg, who uses storytelling as a means of exploring problems of prejudice and violence with children. Storytelling, he argues, offers ways of bridging difference, often 'leaping over language' to the more universal patterns and themes of knowledge, experience, power and struggle within the stories themselves. When discussing children's relationships, for example, you can say, 'do you remember the rat and the cat? Do you think the rat could have done something different in those circumstances?' [...] And then they can come up with solutions about the cat and the rat, but they're not going to come up with solutions about these two kinds who are in total conflict.' Through these characters, however, such forms of storytelling can contribute to the cultivation of empathetic relationships.

Sometimes creating spaces for constructive conflict can be 'as basic as making sure everyone's taken care of...to make sure people can get [to a meeting], that people's expenses are paid, that people are listened to', and that the spaces themselves are physically and emotionally safe. But building such spaces takes time. As Adam reflected,

'these are deeply mundane time-consuming processes that really require a lot of personal energy and a lot of mundane stuff like just being, getting food, making sure that children are cared for, having fun, making sure that people are healthy and...it's really hard.'³¹

Adam also regards subjective states such as humility and courage – things we can neither see nor account for, and which neither precede nor succeed states of openness – to be important factors in the real cultivation of these possibilities.

'Popular education can be this fancy, hexagonal post-it notes with different colours and methods for this, or it could just be dialogue and respectful, brave. [...] I think so much is about humility and courage, actually. Humility is a huge thing for me. I'm not saying I'm always humble, but I think a kind of grounded, open humility is the bravest and best thing where you're offering and open to offers at the same time. It can be very spiritual too, whatever that means to people as individuals.'

Pedagogies of community, solidarity and resistance

It would thus be unwise to conclude that pedagogies of and for radical democracy can be limited to pedagogies of becoming, discomfort and encounter, particularly if these are directed towards the individualised, rationalist subject of liberal democracy. In the first instance, it is impossible to really encounter difference, otherness and the radically new as an individual, both limited and protected by one's own ordinary horizons of meaning and experience. It is reasonably easy to avoid being troubled or transformed on one's own; new

³¹ In art education as well, there is an alternative 'economy of affect' that 'is in circulation within such environments. 'These spaces', he writes, 'require the open attitude of the listener rather than the probing scrutiny of the diagnostician; they also require long and reciprocal knowledge of the people in the pedagogic relationship, an economy of mutual exchange more than accumulation' (Addison 2012: xxx).

possibilities cannot emerge without at least 'the presence of a plurality of local worlds and cultural practices' (Kompridis 2006: 220, 229). Secondly, 'dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming – between those who deny others the right to speak their world and those whose right to speak have been denied them' (Freire 2000: 88). And finally, if struggles to create conditions of genuine dialogue and democratic governance in everyday life are to have any hope of succeeding, they must be grounded in strong affinities, friendships and solidarities which themselves have critical learning – about collective relationships and emotions as well as ideas and strategies – at the heart.

Democratic politics thus involves the cultivation and nurturing of *collective relations*. This is particularly the case for any deep forms of democracy, as far as the task of producing critical knowledge is often undertaken on the margins of the acceptable and the desirable within institutions and everyday life, and can result in individualisation and isolation. To think and govern ourselves in new ways, we must learn to *be* otherwise. And yet, it is precisely individualised sensibilities and competitive practices that are being predominately learned, valued and institutionalised in post-democratic societies, and particularly in mainstream educational institutions, with one consequence being that 'we have lots of information, but don't really have many ideas. There's a lot of collective wisdom that's sort of bubbling under the surface' (Adam 2012).

Artist-activist Jim thus argues that working in radically democratic ways requires exercising a 'weak muscle' in a society which expends huge energy and resources teaching people how to be individualised rather than collaborative. Relations of intelligibility and affinities must be forged through sustained and patient processes of learning that are recursive and rhizomatic rather than linear and bounded. But is a sensibility a muscle-like tool? How do you 'exercise a muscle' that is actually a way of being, or a condition of intelligibility? What cultural and pedagogical practices could close the distance between separated and often divided subjects, in a way that simultaneously expands the horizons of intelligibility and possibility for both?

These are questions that Kompridis sought to answer through his new language of 'freedom-enlarging possibilities' (2006: 57) and the 'enlargement of logical space'? (105). For many cultural workers, such bridging work is accomplished in relatively simple ways. In formal education, for example, bell hooks has described strategies for sharing perspectives on a common theme in ways that 'everyone's voice can be heard, their presence recognized and valued'. By reading aloud short paragraphs that they have written, people 'all have a chance to hear unique perspectives and we are all given an opportunity to pause and listen to one another. Just the physical experience of hearing, of listening intently, to each particular voice strengthens our capacity to learn together' (hooks 1994: 186). In a similar vein, but in contexts of popular adult education, the act of representing and *visualising* other people's experiences, arguments and representations of self – through gestures of performance, for example, or the construction of a piece of writing or work of art – offers an opportunity for 'multiple experiences to be all in the same room at the same time' (Adam 2012). This is consistent with Kompridis's argument that radical receptivity, or 'hearing' multiple voices, is one way of 'keeping open...the logical space of possibility' (2006: 204). The narrowing and silencing of voices, possibilities, ranges of experience, permissible things to think and say, attitudes and activities are all acts of contraction, because with openness in each of these

areas the realms of possible cognitions, experiences and ways of seeing are expanded. Simply by 'fostering and preserving a plurality of cultural practices and a plurality of local worlds' we can 'resist totalizing practices, totalizing disclosures of the world that conceal their disclosedness' (pp. 219-20).

This is not synonymous with radical democracy, and just as well reflects the best of liberal pluralism or the worst of social cacophony. And yet, its significance as a condition for the possibility of democratic power is profound. For without such practices of collective listening and seeing, there can be few opportunities for self-governance or for resisting oppressive power. In one sense, 'the ability of the oppressed to imagine the complete overthrow of their oppressors depends upon the circulation, radicalization and institutionalization of democratic discourse' (Smith 1998: 7). As one environmental activist and popular educator argued,

the government and [the corporation] know how to compartmentalise, or think they know how to compartmentalise, like – that's what an activist looks like, that's what an Asian community organiser looks like, this is what a trade union is like. But what they didn't expect was for us all to speak with each other, and that's where things become a bit scary for the powers that be. They can't compartmentalise us and I thought that was incredibly powerful and possibly one of the biggest successes of our campaign.'

One memory in particular left a powerful imprint upon his work. He remembered

'seeing a lady stood up in a workshop under the flight path in [her neighbourhood], which is really a marginalised community...and said something along the lines of, "I've never felt so valued in being able to make choices for myself and being able to connect the dots". Basically, we've got a whole load of communities under different flight paths together in one room, and then the penny struck that actually, (a) they were not on their own, and (b) they'd all been lied to by [the airline companies]. It was just incredibly powerful stuff, what popular education can do on a real human level which then can make people feel more empowered to go and take more audacious action.'

Another educator recounted her experience of working with refugees who put on a public political performance to publicise their struggles in their city of residence. She had heard much of the rhetoric of 'empowerment' before. But

'when I sat and did the evaluation session...a couple weeks after the big ceremony happened, I just couldn't believe what was coming out of people's mouths. [They said] "I just felt I had this duty, I mean, I was *compelled* to take part because it was about my situation and I felt like I had to be there. And my voice needed to be heard and I pushed myself, and now I've pushed myself and I just feel like I want to do more, and...there's so much more I want to say, and I felt like I was listened to...".'

Such experiences are noted because they are extraordinary. When asked to describe them, many cultural workers want to speak instead about how they survive the long stretches of mundane and invisible labour when nothing seems to be happening at all. The politics of time – to reflect; deliberate and agonise; build trust, understanding and confidence; and take ownership of a process – are critical here. For, 'without the possibility of both deliberation and negotiation, and of the leisureliness that affords them, the conditions for democracy are literally eviscerated' (Brown 2005: 8).

But time – in networked neoliberal societies of speed, in the frenzied temporalities of frontline activist politics, in the compressed labour processes of advanced capitalism, in the gendered divisions of labour in everyday life – is precisely what many people often cannot imagine having (Adams 2011). This insight is not lost on cultural workers, many of whom believe that pedagogies of becoming and of encounter cannot be effective, or may even be counterproductive, when engaged in short-term and institutionally-defined relationships. With all the radical intention in the world, such limitations do not allow people to ‘build a process that people would have ownership from, right from the beginning’, and that could challenge existing institutional forms (Adam 2012). As another popular educator reflected, ‘to have the group or participants really begin to take ownership of a space takes time, and it takes time for the trust to develop beyond some sort of superficial [thing]’ (Alice 2012). One educator even referred to temporally open relationships as an ‘evolutionary missing link’ – time ‘where people get to sit down with a weekend or a week or a month; with such individualised lives I think it could take forever, but to actually start thinking about things in a different way’ (Heather 2012).

In other words, intellectual and political communities of opposition, resistance and alterity not only do not emerge by magic, but are often only made possible by going to considerable pains. They cannot be instrumentally generated through technical methods. For although it sometimes seems that we can use ‘quite simple techniques to build a movement’ (David), the effects of cultural practices are not *determined by the practices themselves*, which imbricate with and are contingent upon the conditions of their own possibility. As one educator pointed out, even the most basic methodology of popular education cannot be understood ‘as though it’s like this thing that can sort of stand on its own’. In her experience, it ‘works best when it is enmeshed in a particular movement or mobilisation...something that’s got a kind of other concrete reality to put into it. Because otherwise it can feel a bit ... discombobulated’ (Ann 2012). As one educator remarked,

‘that stage of people being conscious and speaking out and taking part and feeling like they’ve got, realising that they can participate and act, is just one step in the process, isn’t it? And actually, the forces that then you’ve got to try to deal with or times you’ve got to deal with to actually get the change you’re talking about, are enormous.’

Despite the limitations these experiences are regarded as transformative on several levels. First, they signal to a person that ‘your place in the world has changed’. Second, there is a subsequent realisation that ‘you have the ability to determine the world’ and ‘it’s not set in stone’. This leads, ideally, to a further imagination that ‘things aren’t what they seem to be’, but flexible and contingent. Ultimately, as one popular educator put it, ‘it’s in the aspect of being critical and that’s both self-reflection as well as realising that things aren’t, it’s almost as if the world has changed and therefore it’s seeing things as not what they used to be and therefore seeing that your place isn’t determined and you can actually determine our own life.’

This intimates some grounding for a critical theory of and for the permanent revolution of everyday life. One of Kompridis’s primary objectives is to recover the significance of ‘the everyday’ as a space and time where transformative forms of rationality and cultural practices may be undertaken (2006: 38), and to challenge the belief that an ‘elitist contempt

for the everyday' necessarily inheres in theories of crisis and disclosure.³² He argues that 'if like [in] pragmatism and the later Wittgenstein one thinks of everyday practices as the primary sources of social intelligibility, one will naturally be very concerned about their openness to meaning and possibility, and their ongoing disfiguration by homogenizing and totalizing tendencies within them' (2006: 74). It is precisely this concern, as well as the converse concern with the ongoing *figuration* of alternative everyday through de-homogenizing and anti-essentialist practices, which underlies work in prefigurative forms of radical democracy. But the question remains: what – if anything – connects such pedagogical work in concrete terms to the renewal of radical democracy as a serious political project?

Pedagogy of possibility – a radical, humble, utopian activity

Thinking about radical-democratic life as incorporating multiple pedagogies of emergence and becoming; encounter and discomfort; and community and solidarity enables us to envision the types of learning that can help us to 'risk "living at the edge of our skin," where we find the greatest hope of revisioning ourselves' (Boler 1999: 199). These are critically prefigurative pedagogies, which enable not only the critique and re-imagination of ourselves, others and society, but also foreground the affective and social labour upon which critical thought and practice rely, and create opportunities – or in some cases, needs – to defend the conditions that make such work meaningful and possible. Such pedagogies are vital if we aspire to make way for a kind of politics that valorises dissensus, infinite openness to difference, the decentring and 'tearing away' of epistemological and moral certainties, and the ongoing possibility of transformation in everyday life; which seeks to create new worlds that embody these principles by working within and using the resources of the existing one, with a particular attention to the micro-politics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxvii). Pedagogies of possibility contribute to radical-democratic politics by educating and creating space for the development of this sensibility. This is both a radical and a humble enterprise.

This formulation admittedly runs a risk of possibilitarianism. It would be a grave mistake to presume that radical-democratic pedagogies necessarily contribute directly and productively to wider projects in radical democracy, or that their affirmative forms of ontology and politics coexist unproblematically with other negative forms of critique which are also regarded as important for radical-democratic theory (Holloway 2008). Critical theorists, educators and activists have made – and written extensively about – the mistake of loading disproportionate amounts of hope into education cultural work, whilst simultaneously explaining the its limits in relation to countervailing forces in the constitution of human subjectivities, the conditions of material circumstance, situations of institutional domination, the circulation of economic and symbolic power, the complexities of discourse, and the unaccountable influences of affect. Furthermore, as Inga Scathach (2011) argues,

'theory aside, the practice of popular education is a sticky affair. With an arsenal of techniques that includes theatre, storytelling and art, popular education carries the risk of being adopted by liberal arts organisations or the kind of social movements

³² What is perhaps most interesting in Kompridis's quotes from Mill, Emerson and Heidegger is that the critique of 'mass culture' is not specific to advanced industrial or postmodern society, or to critical theory proper (2006: 72).

that promote self-improvement over confrontational political action. As with any radical project, there exists the tendency to fascinate and attract lifestyle activists, and while this seems somewhat contradictory to its *raison d'être*, popular education is proving no exception. In spite of aiming itself squarely at politically marginalised communities, it is frequently co-opted as a tool for the left to wave around while only really putting it to any use within existing networks.'

At the same time, cultural activists are keen to point out that there is no justification for valorising the more visible actions and campaigns which often represent what many people think of as 'radical politics'. As Beth argued, 'real [society-level] change does not happen in campaigns' any more than it happens in classrooms. For although it is important to wage tangible struggles that can be 'laid down as a story of resistance', she points out that many of these emerge from and are embedded in less tangible, often invisible, protracted 'drippings' of work to criticalise and transform knowledge, subjectivity, affective sensibilities and social relationships. Struggles that are not grounded in such work, she argues, are simply 'shovelling the problem to the future' in its symptomatic form.

Pedagogies of affect, discomfort and hope clearly have the potential to oppose and undermine capitalist rationality and strengthen radical democratic relationships, knowledge and practices. Such work is living proof, to use Marcuse's words, of 'the actuality or possibility of a qualitatively different historical practice which might destroy the existing institutional framework'. However, prefigurative pedagogies do not yet constitute what he referred to as *transcendent projects*, which represent and are accepted as 'real possibilities open at the attained level of the material and intellectual culture' (Marcuse 1964: xx). While they succeed spectacularly in demonstrating that alternatives are possible and may even create micro-democracies and 'moments of excess', they seem to also be demonstrating that these possibilities are created at considerable human cost, and are still also regarded by many people as undesirable or unfeasible in the everyday.³³

Marcuse explained the gap between the potentiality and realisation of a radical political project as a discrepancy between prevailing modes of subjectivity and the objective historical conditions of possibility for new ways of thinking and being emerge; in other words, another manifestation of the 'vicious circle' of needing to transform one in order to shift the other. I would like to suggest, however, that the theories and practices of prefigurative forms of radical democracy offer a path out of this vicious circle – a trap whose viciousness, it turns out, may be partly produced by its own strong theory of transformation which unwittingly reproduces dichotomies of immanence and transcendence by attempting to dialectically resolve them. This impasse of vision was, it seems to me, an honest reading of the historical conjuncture in which it was produced, rather than a failure of the radical imagination. Indeed, we might attend more to the parts of Marcuse's work which elucidate his argument, perhaps prefiguring its own time, that 'aesthetic education constituted a cultivation of the senses and that theory and education were essential components of transformative social change', as well as attending to his hopes, and ultimately his disappointments, in the radical-democratic potential of the new social movements of the 1960s (Kellner 2002).

³³ 'Moments of excess' is a term coined by the Free Association to characterise the presence, in certain historical moments, of 'a collective creativity that threatens to blow open the doors of their societies' (Free Association 2004).

In this paper I have argued that: (1) radical democracy is an inherently pedagogical project; (2) the education of radical democracy is necessarily an affective as well as an intellectual and strategic activity; (3) prefigurative pedagogies are powerful antidotes to deterministic ontologies and hegemonic knowledge; (4) education is political but not synonymous with politics, and therefore should be understood as part of a larger assemblage of activities and practices; (5) neoliberal rationality is already being transformed in spaces of radical-democratic education, activism and cultural work that exists beneath the radar of academic critical theory; and (6) we would benefit collectively from bringing critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical-political practice into conversation with one another, in the spirit of receptivity and critique. I will conclude with a few final thoughts about each of these points.

Radical democracy is a pedagogical project.

Radical democracy is an inherently pedagogical project, in two senses. One way of differentiating between radical democracy and other forms is to understand it as a way of life which is organised around the pursuit of processes of experience through which human beings can learn to continually expand our individual and collective horizons of possibility. Second, radical democracy is 'radical' both empirically and ethically as it describes a mode of politics which continually pushes the boundaries of possibility and opening itself to critique, difference and otherness – thus meaning that there is a frequent need to re-examine the roots of our own intelligibility. This, I have argued, does not come 'naturally' to many people, and is therefore something that we must learn. Educating radical democracy requires pedagogies that address the ontological, affective and relational dimensions of democratic life. The pedagogical, however, is only one dimension of radical-democratic practice, which cannot exist independently of others – including acts of political and economic struggle.

Prefigurative pedagogies can help us to resist and challenge determinism, fatalism and hopelessness, and produce alternatives to 'strong' theories of neoliberal hegemony.

There is a fair amount of derision within critical philosophy of cultural practices which 'merely' demonstrate the possibility of alternative ways of thinking and being in the world, or that open space for imagining a society that is not capitalist, patriarchal, racist, or in any other way violent and possibility-foreclosing. At the same time, there is ubiquitous recognition of a 'crisis of hope' – or in other words, a crisis of ontological politics – in contemporary society. As Kompridis argues, 'since the availability of confidence and hope depends on discourses and practices that facilitate the enlargement of meaning and possibility, then, to the extent that critical theory forsakes its romantic self-understanding, it becomes literally deaf to its calling' (2006: 279). In a period that is described as belonging to a history of 'dark times', it is theoretically and strategically important to critically account for the role that imaginaries and possibilities play in political action.

Prefigurative politics can be a powerful form of immanent and intimate critique, and while it does not *constitute* radical democratic politics, it is an indispensable *dimension* of them. As Dewey put it,

'a sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are, when they are put up in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating "criticism" of the

latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress' (Dewey 2005: 360).

We know that philosophy cannot 'direct' action; 'at the very least, disclosure resists the foreclosure of possibility by disclosing 'alternative possibilities' and facilitating 'with a little luck, the emergence of alternative practices' (Kompridis 2006: 153).

'Cynicism thrives where the cultural space of possibility is fixed, where possibilities appear exhausted and resignation to the current order appears to be the only intelligible response. [...] Philosophy cannot play the role of cultural superhero, but a modest world-disclosing role appropriate to its power of *weak illumination* is certainly not beyond its reach, especially when successful reaching means finding or defending some other way of going on not currently in view. [...] Whatever the suggested alternative, it is not philosophy that determines its viability but those to whom it is addressed, those to whom it is offered for reflective consideration. Philosophy is *just one more voice in this conversation...*' (Kompridis 2006, italics mine).

The experiences of those working with movements illustrate the power of a living critique which speaks in another voice. Sara Motta (2011), reflecting on her popular education work with women in Colombia, suggests that it 'would be unwise at this political conjuncture to close off our political imaginary, through a dismissal of its relevance, to our political context'. Rather, she argues, historical experience suggests that 'it is urgent to cultivate an ethic of openness, dialogue, experimentation and exploration' if we are to give any 'hope to break out of the straightjackets of politics as normal'. If philosophy is one voice, pedagogy is another; there are others, which need to be assembled.

In order to facilitate radical-democratic ways of life, those engaged in radical-democratic education must also create and defend the economic, political and social conditions that make it possible.

One of Marcuse's strongest criticisms of the cultural revolutions of the mid-twentieth century was that while they succeeded in creating 'autonomous' spaces of critique and possibility, they had little impact on the systems of power they opposed, and that their subversive potential was bizarrely dependent on them being *unable* to influence dominant institutions at all (1973). His concerns echo a now much wider contemporary critique of prefigurative and 'autonomous' politics, which is that their predominant strategies of embedded activism, institutional withdrawal and direct action create pressure-release valves for rather than viable alternatives to dominant systems of power, and capitalism in particular.

The theoretical and practical work discussed in this paper, however, suggests an alternative perspective. It includes work undertaken by people seeking to become literate as they seek refuge in English cities; work for environmental justice in 'front-line communities' situated in the vicinity of incinerators, open cast mines and runways; holding behemoth oil corporations to account for the destruction of families and habitats in the Niger Delta; work to criticise and democratise corporatized schools and universities. Within each of these contexts, there is some sense that working 'autonomously' from the dominant institutions and logics of thinking and practice is vital for transformative learning and action. However, this work is itself neither removed from everyday life nor ferreted away in the academy – and that which does fall into these traps is regarded as having an alienated character.

One implication of this is that the very act of doing critical cultural work often creates the need to struggle for its conditions of possibility – to prevent one's students from being seized and deported in the middle of the night, to assert a person's right to exist in public space, to protect land from contamination or foreclosure, to make sure people have bus fare to get to meetings, to resist the imposition of neoliberal rationalities onto ordinary practices in schools. Work 'within' existing institutions and everyday life, which is so often regarded as hopelessly compromised, in fact contains powerful potentials for disrupting those systems of power, so long as it is engaged at this level of intensity. As Smith argues,

'in a radical democratic society, there would be equal access not only to the material resources necessary for self-development, but also to meaningful participation in social, cultural, political and economic decision making. The radical democratization of existing state structures and social formations would require a profound redistribution of power and a complete dismantling of the structures that institutionalize inequality, including capitalist exploitation, sexism, homophobia and racism' (1998).

Any radically democratic theory of human possibilities cannot adequately inform educational or political practice in the abstract. As Nina Power (2008) has argued, we cannot simply argue that 'all people are equally intelligent' without accounting for the ways in which 'the grossly divided and divisive reproduction of economic and cultural capital in all its entrenched and repetitious forms greets us at every turn'.

Critical theorists have been vexed by the dilemma of how to create new needs and desires, when everything in our social and cultural environment seems to steer us towards destructive ones. In a basic sense, the pursuit of a prefigurative politics opens up possibilities for such needs and desires to emerge *out of necessity*, in so far as we realise that we are beginning to think and do things that cannot be accommodated or tolerated within our existing base of resources, and that it is the latter which need to be transformed.³⁴

Pedagogies of possibility must be understood as parts of wider projects to dismantle neoliberalism and cultivate radical democracy.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe once argued that 'once human beings accept the legitimacy of the principle of equality in one sphere they will attempt to extend it to every other sphere of life' (1990: 128). Unfortunately – and particularly in societies that not only enable but encourage people to compartmentalise themselves and their lives, and which people are deeply carved into unequal positions, spheres and geographical locations – this is not necessarily how egalitarian sensibility or democracy works in practice. In addition, many people will find that certain areas of their lives lend themselves to radical-democratic ways of thinking and being more readily than others. Those who are engaged in cultural work argue that they need to learn how to cross borders between theory and action, formal and informal, mass and elite.

³⁴ For a good example of this, see Judith Butler's (2011) account of the significance of occupying public spaces: 'as much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech', she wrote, 'we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment'.

For some, it is clear that art, education, research and activism are interrelated sites for critical cultural work, and for the cultivation of radical democratic ways of life. But this does not mean that they are interchangeable; in fact, as one artist suggested, the fact that each is grounded in a different conception of truth means that each can make different sorts of contributions to the project on the whole. Take, for example, John's theory of the relationship between art, activism and academic research. An 'activist' truth might emphasise the 'now-ness' of a situation, rather than reflecting on the past or the distant future; it facilitates the formulation of an immediate and materialisable action. An 'artistic' truth, on the other hand, might have more flexible temporality, 'sliding around' between past and future, playing with the imagination. Finally, a 'research' truth would be more interested in verifiable fact; it is closer to the 'common' conception of truth. John argued that if these different conceptions of truth can be brought together in constructive conflict and meaningful dialogue to respond to a particular problematic, a 'special quality' emerges which 'allows us to push through the boundaries of the possible'. Given the uncommonness of this in everyday life, those who are engaged in any of these practices need to devote adequate time and energy to learning – intellectually, affectively and relationally – how to engage with this 'special quality' as a possibility-enabling practice.

Radical democracy is already here and now, and ever not-yet.

It is perhaps a cliché of radical-democratic theory to say that politics is 'here and now'. In one sense, this is obviously so: radical democratic politics are, at present, already being renewed. In a recent article on the Occupy movement, David Graeber argues that 'when the history [of capitalism] is finally written...it's likely all of this tumult – beginning with the Arab Spring – will be remembered as the opening salvo in a wave of negotiations over the dissolution of the American Empire'. Speaking to socially engaged artists, educators and activists, however, one gets the impression that this salvo is just one of the more visible and sensational illustrations of the politics of possibility, which has been developing drip-by-drip since the 1970s, and apace since the 1990s. The excitement of Occupy has enchanted even the most critical of critical theorists (Amsler and Neary 2012). But at times, I think we are forgetting ourselves. These politics and potentialities are resurgent but not new. What is different is that we have been able to see them articulate into quasi-popular struggles in our own time and place. However, the recent emphasis within critical theory and radical-democratic reporting on the ignition of the radical imagination, often pitted as an 'alternative' to the building of collective political struggle, draws our attention away not only from the multitudes of people who are engaged in local, radical-democratic projects with a lower 'co-efficient of visibility' and less intellectual status, but also from the vital insights that these cultural workers and radical democrats have into the affective and pedagogical labour that is required to make such projects even marginally sustainable.

The existence of these rich and diverse cultural practices within neoliberal society raises questions about the analytical and strategic usefulness of desiring to 'dismantle' neoliberalism. It is useful to remember that 'neoliberalism' is a convenient but perhaps overused term for an assemblage of economic, political, cultural, psychological and affective practices, or a form of power, or a political rationality, which is everywhere circulating but nowhere stabilised into a permanent thing. But by naming it as an objective system, 'most theories of neoliberal rationality assume a certainty and sufficiency that blind us to the potential failures or faltering moments of this new governmental technology' (Gibson–Graham 2006: 4). While the abstract potential for radical democracy appears to be further

than ever away theoretically, capitalist power seems to have been pushed to its limits by prefigurative political practices, in part because it cannot easily assimilate them. As it seems that neoliberalism will not be dismantled prior to the radical democratisation of social, political and economic life, the cultivation of radical democracy in everyday life is thus a vital part of any project which aspires to contribute to the building of post-capitalist societies. This, however,

‘cannot simply be put “out there” in the world with the hope that it will flourish. It needs to be sustained by the continual work of making and remaking a space for it to exist in the face of what threatens to undermine and destroy it. [...] The self-education and formation of ourselves as thinkers of theorized possibility are crucial to this practice’ (Gibson–Graham 2006: xxxvii).

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